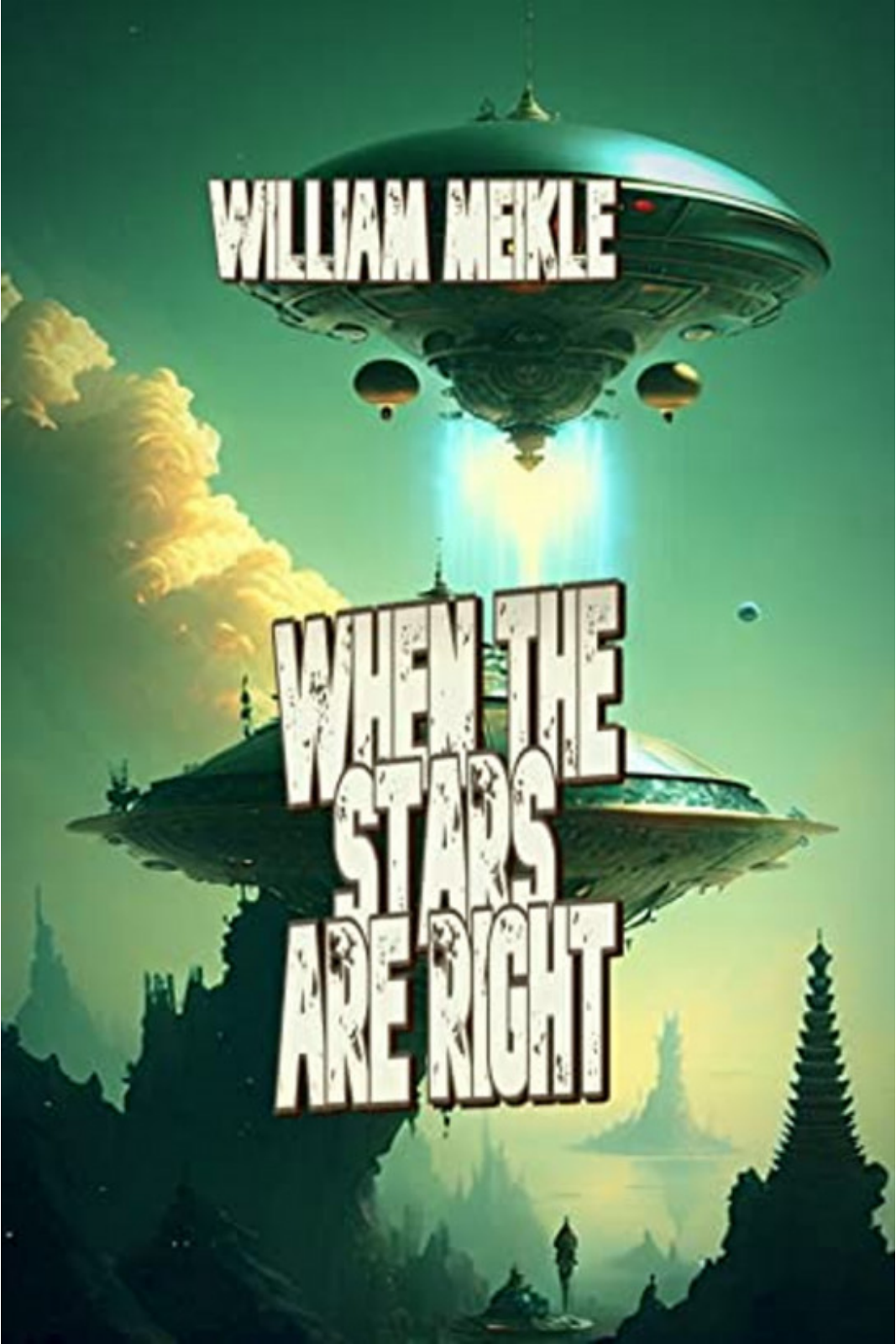
WILLIAM MEIKLE
WHEN THE STARS ARE RIGHT

When The Stars Are Right
By
William Meikle

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~-oO0Oo-~

TAKEN FROM THE TAPE JOURNAL OF MEGAN DOWLES, CONSULTANT HISTORIAN -- USS POLDAKAYNE

(Tape No. 1 -- 11:45 pm -- August 1st -- 2025)

Hello darling.

I'm settling in OK here, but I wish I was at home with you. You might have seen me on the link talking to that snotty newsman. Don't believe a word of what they said, I've been promised that my role here is purely as a consultant -- all the rest is just scare mongering.

The ship is really impressive. Remember all those old 2D films with the flying saucers? Well they've actually gone and built one. It took my breath away when I first saw it from the viewing deck of the Asimov. It's nearly fifty meters in diameter and ten meters high at the edges. Its looks silver, shiny and mean. If you can imagine looking down on it as it decked, my berth is at nine o'clock, almost halfway in towards the centre. Everything looks and smells new -- antiseptic like a hospital. The room is pretty small -- only about two meters square with most of that being taken up by the bed at the moment. I've been told that it folds away, transforming itself into a desk and seat, but I'm too shagged out after the trip to do anything other than sleep.

I'll drop you another line tomorrow. Maybe by then I'll know what all the rush was about. I'm still unsure as to why they need a medieval scholar on a high-tech piece of equipment like this.

Give my love to the kids. Miss you.

~-oO0Oo-~

(Tape No. 2 -- 11:02 pm -- August 2nd -- 2045)

This has got to be the weirdest thing that ever happened. If I'm to explain it to you I'll have to give some history, so bear with me. It might not seem relevant at first, but all will become clear. I promise you -- you won't believe it. I'm not sure I do -- and I'm in the middle of it.

We were called into the conference room after breakfast. Breakfast was fine by the way -- none of that reconstituted goo you expect space people to eat. I had real eggs, tomatoes and freshly squeezed orange juice. The General stood at the top of the table as the twelve of us entered. He looks a lot like your father -- stiff, straight and uptight. He doesn't smile much, and when he does it never reaches his eyes. I wouldn't like to mess with him.

He told us that what we were about to see was highly classified and that all communications home would have to be censored. I don't know how much of this will be let through, but here goes anyway.

It seems the whole thing began in the 1990s. The General reminded us that the people back then didn't have holovids and that what we were to see was a reconstruction. It looked lifelike enough to me.

The vid began with a Brit scientist -- Thompson. It seems he was a research physicist who also dabbled in parapsychology. There was a lot of stuff about his academic career and background which turned me off, but then it finally got to the good bit.

Thompson had a theory that paranormal events were associated with the production of energy -- a new form of energy which, as yet, had not been investigated. At this point the vid went off into a long explanation about particle physics and the space-time continuum.

I switched off -- you know how I am with that kind of stuff. I wondered what the relevance of it all was, but I was snapped back to the vid when it went 2D. They were showing a scene from an old movie where these three guys managed to catch ghosts in a little oblong box. Seemingly Thompson had got inspiration from the film and had been able to build some sort of containment chamber for paranormal energy. Sounds weird doesn't it. Don't worry. It gets worse.

By using his box of tricks he was able to prove that a small amount of electromagnetic energy was produced during these events. The vid showed him holding a meter. The meter was going crazy, while in the background something invisible was throwing pots and pans around the kitchen. The crazy little sucker had a huge grin spread all over his face.

Have you guessed where all this is leading yet? I'll give you a night to think about it. I'm going to stay up a bit longer -- they're showing the holovid version of Alien tonight. I've never watched it during the trip before -- I wonder if I'll get any sleep afterwards?

I hope they allow this to get through. Hope you are keeping well.

All my love.

~-oO0Oo-~

(Tape No. 3 -- 8.16 am -- August 3rd -- 2045)

Morning sweetheart. What with that and the holovid yesterday, I didn't sleep much. I suppose I'd better put you out of your misery and get on to the really unbelievable bits.

Thompson's work caused quite a stir -- any new form of energy was pounced upon quickly back in the 1990s. Of course it was all kept quiet -- can you imaging the outrage if it had been publicised?

There seems to have been two main groups involved in research -- one in the States and one at Oxford University. The one in the States had the first success. They managed to produce a battery to store the power released.

There was only one major problem -- one 'apparition' only gave enough power to run a light bulb for about an hour. It seemed that Thompson's discovery was of no practical use -- after all there was only a limited amount of known apparitions to go around.

This is where the Oxford connection comes in.

You know how the Brits have always been interested in spooks and the things that go bump in the night? Well, one bright spark had the idea of linking Thompson's machinery with a seance. That's where the real breakthrough came.

The holovid showed the whole thing with remarkable clarity. The seance had been going on for six minutes with no reaction from the meters, then suddenly, just as the planchette began to move, the machinery went wild, meters overloading, cameras running at double speed, people screaming. Pure pandemonium, but funny to watch.

It was calculated later that enough energy was released to keep the average household going for a year.

This all happened round about the turn of the century, and since then things have got really wild. I'll have to tell you about them later -- duty calls

We've been promised that we'll find out what we're here for. I'll give you an update later.

Tell Sean not to worry about his Math exam. I'm sure he'll pass it with flying colours.

Oh, and do remind Jennie to send me a new painting. Her primary colours would do wonders for the walls in this room.

All my love forever.

~-oO0Oo-~

COMPILERS NOTE: TAPE 4 HAS BEEN LOST. IT IS PRESUMED TO HAVE CONTAINED DETAILS OF THE UCLA DISASTER OF 2015. INTERESTED PARTIES ARE REFERRED TO "THE JOURNAL OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY VOL. 112(5) PP 127 - 162" WHERE A FULL ACCOUNT OF THE MATTER MAY BE FOUND.

~-oO0Oo-~

(Tape No. 5 -- 8.18 am -- August 4th -- 2045)

As you can imagine, they were none too keen to continue their experiments after the fiasco. The work was ostensibly dropped, but all that happened was that the military took over. After all, they are always interested in anything with a potential for mass destruction.

They quickly realised that any further experiments would have to be done away from large cities, so a test centre was set up in Death valley -- you know, where all the interesting stuff we never hear about goes on.

They also realised that they had stumbled onto something which would have world wide ramifications. Naturally they kept quiet. Current thinking is that they are experimenting with a gateway to another dimension. The greater the 'strength' of the summoned entity the more power is leaked through.

At this point the holovid became very strange and the General had to reassure us that what we were seeing was not a reconstruction. This is what actually happened.

The first thing we saw was an empty room. Empty, that is, except for a pentagram, seemingly etched on the floor. That's right -- a pentagram.

From out of view to the left came a figure dressed in black -- long flowing robes like a monk. As he lifted his cowl you could see that he was no more than twenty-five years old.

His hair was cut military style and his gait was stiff and straight as he strode into the pentagram. A readout in the bottom left showed us the state of the battery cells which would capture any released power.

I recognised the rite almost immediately. It came from the grimoire of Honorius -- widely discredited amongst people who study such things and dangerous to boot. I won't bore you with the details -- if you want to know about it, look it up on the vid, it's filed under Ceremonial Magic -- but the version they were using is supposedly capable of summoning an imp or minor demon.

Ten minutes into the scene, after seemingly interminable rantings in Latin, something actually began to happen. We couldn't see anything, but the batteries started registering -- only a minor flicker at first -- but then a steady rising indication of power flooding the room.

The camera operator must have noticed something that we hadn't. He panned into a spot on the floor six feet in front of the would-be necromancer -- a spot just outside the pentagram. The floor was beginning to bulge -- like someone struggling underneath a thin blanket.

The meters on the batteries were now going wild, rising up towards one hundred per cent capacity.

The camera snapped back to the floor -- just in time to catch sight of a long taloned arm breaking through -- a red arm which had too many joints and far too many fingers. Serrated talons dragged on the floor, screeching, setting my teeth on edge as the arm struggled for leverage. A shoulder began to appear as the floor bulged, its surface melting like hot wax. Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of the young man stepping backwards away from the sight -- stepping out of the pentagram.

There was a blinding flash of golden light, which forced me to look away from the vid. When my eyes had recovered, I looked back, but the room was empty, only the empty pentagram and the meters were visible. The meters read one hundred per cent capacity.

The General had to stop the session to give us time to assimilate all this. During the break I began to realise how serious this was for me -- and I wasn't happy about it.

We were called back half an hour later. That's when my fears were confirmed. They had found out -- after some trial and a lot of error I suppose -- that it was not feasible to use the power they had generated on Earth. We were given a long talk by a NASA engineer on the physics of propulsion before they got to the real meat.

This ship is a prototype. It seems that they've found a way to utilise the power in propelling a ship through space ten times more efficiently -- and five times faster -- than anything else known. Or so they think.

The drive has been built around a new generation of batteries which currently stand empty in the central core. They want me to power them up.

They want to go to Mars.

They want me to conjure them up a demon.

~-oO0Oo-~

COMPILERS NOTE: TAPE 6 HAS BEEN OMITTED. IT CONTAINS ONLY PERSONAL MATTERS NOT RELEVANT TO THE MISSION. ANYONE WISHING ACCESS SHOULD CONTACT NASA RECORDS OFFICE 7.12

~-oO0Oo-~

(Tape No. 7 -- 11:39 pm -- August 5th -- 2045)

Hello again, sweetheart.

This situation keeps getting more and more strange.

I spent most of today on the computer. You've really going to have trouble believing this. They have discovered that a summoning can be done using a hologram for the summoner, as long as it is placed inside the pentagram. I suppose it means that they don't lose so many volunteers.

They want me to tell the computer which spell to use for the summoning and then, after the power cells are fired up, how to banish whatever it is we manage to call up.

I told the General about my misgivings concerning dabbling in Demonology, but he doesn't believe in Demons. He thinks that we are tapping into another dimension. He believes that mankind has known about it for a long time, but has cloaked it in religious ceremony and symbolism to preserve the secret. I hope he's right -- maybe there is a scientific rationale -- but I'm worried, very worried.

I think you'll like Dean -- the computer engineer. He has a wicked sense of humour and a great talent for mimicry. His takeoff of the General made me laugh out loud for the first time since I left you.

The hologram necromancer was his idea. I think he was surprised as anyone when it worked in tests. He tells me that they have tried the Honorius rite on eight occasions now -- the last two with the hologram. Before that they lost six men.

He personally designed the hologram. He calls it Crowley, but to me it looks like Gandalf. You know the type -- pointed hat, long beard and piercing eyes -- looks like a maniac.

Dean showed me the chamber where it will all happen. At the moment it is empty apart from a six-foot circle in the middle. This circle is a thin sheet of 24 carat gold, just waiting to be etched with the pentagram I decide on.

I must go, there is someone at the door. Take care.

Love you.

~-oO0Oo-~

(Tape No. 8 -- 8.47 am -- August 6th -- 2045)

Sorry about the cut off last night. It was a new arrival on board and he wanted to see me urgently. Get this -- he's from the Vatican. Cardinal John Docherty -- exorcist.

Do you believe it -- an exorcist in 2045? He said he'd been asked in person by the Pope to get himself on board -- in case of emergencies.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, he's very well versed in the

literature and we stayed up, swapping stories and drinking his whisky, until around three this morning, finally deciding to work together on the summoning. I feel a little hung over, but not too bad.

Today John and I have to decide what demon we try to summon. I thought that he would be completely against the whole idea, but it seems he wishes to see what happens. He's got a strong Irish brogue and he said to me -- in his mocking way."

"I've never met a prince of hell yet that could stand up to an Irishman in fair fight."

How to you like my attempt at an Irish accent? Pitiful, eh?

I'd better go. I think I need a couple of black coffees before facing the day.

Kiss kiss. Love you.

~-oO0Oo-~

(Tape No. 9 -- 11.35 pm -- August 6th -- 2045)

Working seems to bring some stability to this crazy mess. John and I spent the morning with the computer going through the literature. We have a theory.

Considering that the experiments so far have yielded enough energy to power a small town, if we conjure up a fully fledged demon, we should be able to power this ship.

John's got some ideas on the subject. He reminded me of Great Cthulhu -- a major league player amongst the ancient pagan gods. John has had access to some of the forbidden books -- the Vatican seems to be jam packed with them.

Makes you wonder about the piety of some of the archbishops -- I can imagine them scurrying to the forbidden books for a quick thrill after matins.

Anyway, John has seen the Necronomicon, and even showed me a couple of facsimile pages. He reckoned that Cthulhu is worth fifty Dukes of Hell on his own and has worked out the amount of time we'd have to have him in the chamber to power up the batteries. Neither of us believe a word of it, of course, but he thinks that the General will be very impressed by the figures. We adjourned at lunch time to the rec. area. After the first day's breakfast the food has gotten worse. We now get subjected to the reconstituted gooey stuff. I should have known it was too good to last.

The more I think about it, the more surreal the whole thing becomes. Am I really trying to conjure up a demon to power a spacecraft? Sometimes I think that it is all an elaborate joke at my expense. Any minute now a horde of laughing, shrieking colleagues are going to descend on me, awestruck at my gullibility.

At other times -- especially when I meet John's stare -- I am more frightened than I have ever been.

Later in the afternoon we chose the summoning rite, deciding on one from the mad Arab's book -- look it up on the vid if you want some gruesome entertainment. It details all kinds of paraphernalia which is deemed necessary, but John is adamant that only the words and the pentagram count.

Just as well, really. I can do without the nails from the dead child's coffin or the candles made from human flesh.

I couldn't even pronounce most of the words in the spell, but John was more capable. I wondered again about what really goes on in the Vatican.

We passed our decision on to Dean who programmed it into the computer, then shared a drink as we watched the robo-arm etch the pentagram into the gold disk -- first cutting the fine grooves and then depositing hairline tracks of silver into the etched markings.

The General was very happy to note that the batteries started charging as soon as the pentagram was complete.

One last thing. Dean was looking pleased with himself all afternoon. When I asked him why, he showed me what he'd done to the hologram of the summoner.

It still looks maniac, but now it has my face.

We do it tomorrow.

~-oO0Oo-~

(Tape No. 10 -- 12.30 pm -- August 11th -- 2045)

Hello, sweetheart.

Well, I'm still alive. They tell me that you insisted on being kept informed, but I wanted to drop you a line to let you know I'm OK -- just a bit shaken up.

I suppose you want to know what happened.

I'm not too sure myself -- it all came so fast -- but I'll tell you what I think occurred. It will be best if I start off slowly -- things get a bit hectic at the end.

Picture it.

A circular room about five meters in diameter. In the centre is the pentagram. I am off to the left in the control room with Dean and we have an observation window about five feet square looking into the room.

Opposite me I can see the General and John looking in from a similar window. I know that in a room to the left of us the remainder of the crew are following proceedings on the vid.

Dean is waiting to be given the nod by the General. I can see a

bead of sweat running along the crease between his nose and his cheek. The battery meters show a slow but steadily climbing charge.

He gets the nod from the General and starts twiddling the buttons on the console. The summoner appears in the centre of the pentagram, feet first.

In the space of five seconds it builds to the tall wizard -- my face leering back at me through the window. Dean twiddles a few more buttons and the wizard sweeps his sword around the circle. He waits for another signal from the General. The bead of perspiration is now teetering on his mustache.

I can see that the meters are rising faster. The General nods his head, Dean pushes another button and the summoner begins.

A voice begins the harsh guttural chant and, although I know the words, they are spoken too quickly for me to comprehend them. Across the room I can see John mouthing the spell, keeping in time with the computer.

Otherwise the silence is deep as can be.

"Arak barang Cthulhu f'thang.

"Cthulhu R'lyeh f'rhenghi Ia!

"Ia Cthulhu

"Ia Cthulhu"

Twenty seconds pass. The computer stops chanting. The meters stop rising.

The bead of sweat falls off Dean's chin to the floor. The General is glaring at me. I turn away, mostly in relief, but I get distracted by a movement near the pentagram.

As if from a great distance I can hear a cry, like a wounded seagull.

"Tekeli-li Tekeli-li."

And behind that, a manic piping -- a crazed flutist who plays in a flurry of cacophonous discordances.

Dean touches my arm -- he, too, has seen the movement. The meters start to rise -- more rapidly this time. At a point midway round the room between us and the other window, the walls start to bulge and flatten, bulge and flatten.

The wall stretches and tears as easily as a piece of newly rolled dough. An arm appears, and appears and appears.

It is three times as long as a human arm with texture similar to that of rhinoceros hide. There is an extra joint, between the wrist and the elbow, and six inch talons on each of the seven fingers. I notice that the meters are going crazy, passing fifty, then sixty per cent capacity as I watch.

The shoulder-end of the arm is now being pushed through the wall, followed by the beginnings of a torso. Looking across the room I

see John is in argument with the General. A movement catches my attention. I look round to see the wizard slipping across the pentagram.

I look down and see that Dean has become distracted by the demon's entrance and has allowed the image to wander. I tap him on the shoulder. He starts, looks at me and twists the button. Too far. The wizard leaves the pentagram. And all hell breaks loose.

The demon pushes the top half of his body through the wall. Try to image an ugly, wart-ridden toad with a set of teeth like a shark. Now try imaging it with three-foot wide head. Got that? Now imagine it smiling -- a Cheshire Cat grin which is all teeth and saliva and rotting gums. And from around the mouth, like a grotesque beard, hang a myriad of dancing tentacles, each with their own, fang-filled mouth, each screaming in time to the meters.

The meters are going wild, eighty, ninety, one hundred percent as I watch.

Across the room the General is trying to catch Dean's attention. Dean is trying to manoeuvre the wizard back into the pentagram -- with little success. The demon is beginning to pull the rest of its body through the wall.

I can see what looks like a segmented tail starting from where you'd expect the legs to be. The lower half of its body oozes a trail of grey pulsating slime as it slides into the room. The interior of the room is beginning to glow golden.

The demon has pulled ten meters of tail from the wall and it shows no sign of tapering towards the end. Its bulk dwarfs the hologram of the wizard, towering over it, dripping saliva to the floor where it hisses and boils like water on a hot griddle. I can barely see the other window -- only enough to notice that the General is now holding John, as if to stop him from doing something. I press the button to begin the banishment, more in hope than in anything else. As the voice begins, the demon looks straight at me. His eyes are golden and pierce me into stillness.

A blue electric discharge snaps noisily from the talons on its left hand, running around the walls of the room, dancing across the walls. I lean forward towards Dean, but it is too late.

The electric shock flings him backwards against the wall where he falls, slumped as if in a stupor.

I can see that the demon has now pulled the whole of its body into the room.

I try to get control of the wizard, which seems to have baffled the demon, when I realise that the banishment spell is still being broadcast.

The demon gives up trying to grab the hologram and studies it

instead. It lifts that huge broad head and looks straight at me. I see from the corner of my eye that three smaller, redder arms are beginning to push their way through the wall, groping blindly for purchase.

The demon makes a move in my direction, but something stops it. As it turns I see, behind it, that John has entered the room, crucifix raised. He is saying something, but the noise from the banishment spell and the ever increasing hum from the batteries drown him out.

I move the wizard back into the pentagram -- quite how, I'm not sure. The golden light in the room has increased so much that I have to shade my eyes.

I can see that the demon has got John, holding him to his chest.

I can see at least three of the tentacles piercing John's body, his blood falling to the floor to hiss and bubble alongside the saliva.

The banishment spell is nearing its end. Blue bolts of electricity are crackling around the room. John is dead -- I can see that. The demon is moving towards me, still cradling John's body. The batteries have started to screech.

I think of you and the kids just as the banishment spell ends. There is a blast of golden light which drives all further thought from my head.

~-oO0Oo-~

(Tape No. 11 -- 2.30 pm -- August 11th -- 2045)

That's all really. I woke up on the Asimov this morning and, apart from a severe headache, there seems to be no after effects.

The General came to see me and, after exchanging some insincere pleasantries, he helped me fill in the parts which I'd blanked on.

When the golden flash came, he was on the floor -- just getting to his feet after being sandbagged by John. He was turned away from the window, so didn't see what happened, but by the time he reached the door, the room had been scoured.

There was no trace of the pentagram or of John's body. The whole room looked as if it had just been cleaned.

He is very pleased with the results of our 'experiment.' The batteries are fully charged and he intends to go ahead with the Mars trip. He was suitably contrite about the deaths of John and Dean of course, but he still believes that there is a scientific rationale.

He thinks we have tapped into a tremendous energy potential and says he intends to press for further experimentation.

I told him that I'd fight him, but the look in his eyes showed me all I needed to know. To the military eye, the experiment was a

success. He has already won.

They took me to the viewing port to see the Poldakayne depart. We had to have full filters on the windows as it spun off across the sky, streaming golden light in a long comet tail behind it. It was night on earth below.

Millions of people will have seen a new star.

I need to see you, hug you. I need you to bring me back to reality -- to reassure me that I have done no wrong.

I keep thinking of something John said: "Great Cthulhu has slept for millennia, but when the stars are right he will awaken and chaos will walk the skies."

I wonder if the stars are right out there in the vastness, out towards Mars.

See you very soon.

Lots and lots of love and kisses.

~-oO0Oo-~

FROM USOS ASIMOV FOR THE ATTENTION OF M. DOWLES -- 21ST JUNE 2046.

The Mars trip has been a great success. Congratulations. Request your help in our next mission. We are going to need more power.

General J.E. Levi
Commander U.S.S. Zeus

~-o0O0o-~

This is an old one, from about 1993, not long after I started out. It got reworked into an expanded novella THE PLASM for Dark Regions Press, but here it is in its original form. Think of it in black and white, 50s B movie style — that's how it runs in my head.

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